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Water Along the Border: An Introduction to "Water Issues in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands"

Not so long ago, most people's ideas about political borders were relatively simple. While fights over the locations of national borders were not uncommon, the idea that borders simply serve as political boundaries that delineate territories with distinctive laws and customs was virtually a truism. Borders marked the periphery—areas distant from centers of activity, ideas, and power. As a result, scant attention was paid to lands and resources along borders because often the consequences of neglect seemed minimal. With few exceptions, natural resources within borderlands were not connected to the processes by which nations established their identity nor were resources, such as water, likely to be viewed as being essential to national development.

As the twentieth century closes and the twenty-first century begins, borders—both in practice and theory—are no longer widely ignored. Borders and borderlands have become increasingly important for the insights they reveal into the processes and implications of globalization. Pragmatic questions and solutions are posed about the events, ideas, and patterns that distinguish borderlands and that create unique challenges and opportunities for cultural interaction, industrialization, the development of law, and the management of natural resources. On a theoretical level, the significance of borders is being subjected to new critiques just as the characteristics of borderlands are being contested. Scholars, politicians, journalists, activists, and industrialists increasingly are paying attention to sites along national borders and the natural resources associated with them.

This issue of the *Natural Resources Journal* focuses on the borderlands between the United States and Mexico. Even before the border between Mexico and the United States was set in its current location, this region was distinctive. The current 2,000-mile long border was established during the mid-nineteenth century under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; yet before this time the area was the northern frontier of Mexico and, before Mexico, these lands encompassed the northern footholds of New Spain. The Spanish language has been a major influence, imprinting many ideas and landscapes that define the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. Although the English language is a relative newcomer, it has begun to mark the region as well. Long considered a land of interactions between different groups, people and polities have at times fought, at other

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times met on common ground, and out of such encounters hybrid cultures, new institutions, and distinctive lifestyles have developed within these borderlands.

Because of the region's aridity, many transactions along the U.S.–Mexico borderlands have involved water. Conflicts over water have alternated with efforts to cooperate but concerns about water, in one form or another, have been constant. Until recently, the availability of water has been a primary factor that influenced where people settled and how they lived their lives. Today, while greater quantities of water are moved in accordance with demands, there is still never enough water to go around and the quality of water is of greater concern than ever before. The few streams and rivers that traverse the borderlands are simultaneously valuable and commonplace enough to be taken for granted, while groundwater and treated effluent are increasingly becoming coveted resources.

This special issue of the *Natural Resources Journal* is concerned with historic and contemporary water issues along the U.S.–Mexico border. Water issues are examined that influence the southern portion of the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas in the United States, and in Mexico, the northern portions of the states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas. Overall, these articles tend to provide more extensive coverage of water issues along the western rather than the eastern borderlands, and more closely reflect the views of authors residing north rather than south of the border.

The first section of this special issue includes three articles, each devoted to examining a particular type of water issue within the borderlands, as well as a commentary that places these articles within a broader perspective. While the theme of water scarcity along the border is common to each article, the authors have chosen to address different dimensions of water issues within a variety of border contexts. In the first article of this section, Kate Berry emphasizes the notion that water disputes in early nineteenth century Alta California were embedded in broader cultural conflicts and asserts that exploring connections between water and culture remains important today. In the second article, Barbara Morehouse and her co-authors examine the need for drought planning using the historic record and evaluate the future potential for treated effluent as a water source in the neighboring border towns of Nogales, Sonora, and Nogales, Arizona. In the third article, Jennifer Pitt and her co-authors are concerned with water availability for riparian restoration in the Colorado River Delta. The section commentary provided by Emlen Hall touches upon the broader significance of these themes and discusses their relevance for borderland water issues within New Mexico.

Borderland water issues are strikingly complex; few have simple explanations or yield to easy fixes. The articles in the first section tackle

knotty border water problems by examining the distinctive physical, social, and institutional characteristics of places and watersheds. Each author explicitly recognizes that water issues have been incrementally structured over time through an array of environmental, cultural, economic, political, and legal processes operating across multiple spatial scales. As a result, water issues are explained as they are spatially situated, historically grounded, and immersed in the political economy of their time.

Articles in the second section also consider socio-spatial dimensions in their analyses of water issues, but in this section the emphasis shifts to the influence of borderland institutions in addressing water conflicts. The three articles and the commentary in the second section investigate the potential for specific institutions to shape the discourse surrounding contemporary water issues along the border. These authors share an interest in examining how new institutional arrangements can influence the processes by which water conflicts are addressed and resolved.

In the first article of the second section, Margaret Wilder addresses water quality problems encountered by farmers irrigating in northern Sonora and considers how a formal appeal to a newly-formed tri-national commission (the Commission on Environmental Cooperation in Montreal, Canada) has altered relations between rural peasant society and the state. The second article by Christopher Brown and Stephen Mumme examines the potential for adapting the institutional arrangement of *consejos de cuenca* (watershed councils) currently used in Mexico, within broader binational settings in the Tijuana–San Diego watershed and the Rio Grande–Rio Bravo watershed. The third article by Suzanne Michel looks at an alternate institutional approach currently used in another part of the state of California, hydrocommons governance, as a means of opening dialogues about more extensive issues associated with water supply provision and water quality in the Tijuana–San Diego area. The commentary by Vivienne Bennett and Lawrence Herzog places institutional changes associated with borderland water conflicts within the context of rapid globalization and outlines recent developments that influence water politics along the U.S.–Mexico border.

The articles and commentaries in this special issue of the *Natural Resources Journal* make important contributions to borderland studies, drawing attention to border water issues in Mexico and the United States. Too often water has been associated with intractable conflicts in these borderlands and problems that are said to defy solution. Instead of throwing up their hands in dismay, however, the authors here have rolled up their sleeves and gotten to work. There is no magic bullet and accordingly, these authors have not coalesced upon a single approach; different authors highlight the significance of cultural norms regarding water use, drought-preparedness, water re-use, ecological vision, water re-allocation, changing political economies, watershed management, expanding water

dialogues to include un/under-represented perspectives, and the effects of globalization. Yet, underlying the work of each author are pragmatic approaches that look to theory for perspective, while dedicating considerable energy to detailed empirical case studies. Through their work here, the authors reinforce the notion that borders continue to be fertile sites for both research and action.